DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 037 175 HE 001 403

AUTHOR Brewster, Kingman, Jr.
TITLE If Not Reason, What?
INSTITUTION American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 29 Dec 69
NOTE 7p.; Address to the Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Boston, Mass., Dec. 29, 1969

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45
DESCRIPTORS *Activism, *Governance, *Higher Education, *Institutional Role, *Relevance (Education), Responsibility, Universities

ABSTRACT

The challenge to university governance has become an issue of "Anarchy or Hierarchy." Some students want the university to be a "community" with no distinctions in rank, status or authority among the various members. Yet the university is inherently a hierarchical institution that cannot avoid making judgments, and in making these judgments, the institution must apply "reasoned elaboration," not hunches or intuition. Another challenge to the university is the impatience of the young with inaction, complexity, and doubt. The university must admit the weaknesses and shortcomings of its inheritance: that it is not the place for all people, that not all scholarship and learning are equally significant, and that reason is not the only clue to truth. But it must continue to assert that impetuous action, conscious oversimplification, refusal to doubt, and the rejection of reason are enemies of the university. "...if we are not to slip into a dark age of irrationality the universities must defend the ideal of objectivity." (AF)

ED037175

The American Association for the Advancement of Science
1969 Annual Meeting, Boston, Mass.
Phi Beta Kappa - Sigma Xi Lecture, Monday Evening, Dec. 29, 1969
Kingman Brewster, Jr., President of Yale University
"If Not Reason, What?"

To be allowed to address this prestigious gathering of academic achievers is indeed an honor.

If I cannot join you in the recall of outstanding personal humanistic or scientific accomplishment, I can at least join you in a nostalgia for the better days gone by.

With the humanists I can yearn for the days when the world of history, the arts, and letters was unabashed in its admiration for aristocratic taste. Grace, style, and even manners were honored.

With the scientists I can remember the happy hope of not so long ago that those who created the power to destroy could create the power to prosper. As a fund raiser I can long for the days when an eager society financed a veritable scientific binge in the name of national security, health, education, and welfare.

Perhaps my own personal nostalgia is especially poignant, since I was a child of the hope that reason could shackle political and economic power in the name of law. The Harvard citation to its law graduates bade us "to help in the shaping and application of those wise restraints that make men free."

Now we feel that our values are unappreciated at best, scorned at worst - both by the elder philistines on the right and the juvenile barbarians on the left.

As an officer in the "effete corps" perhaps I should fight back against our latter-day Goliath. However that is scarcely necessary since we meet in Boston, the home of the "impudent snob." Some feel more hope than threat in the suggestion that we have been "written off" by the Nixon Administration.

But the more interesting challenge to those of us who "would characterize themselves as intellectuals" comes from within the effete corps itself; not from the silent majority without, but from the raucus minority within the house of intellect. I refer to the pupils (a much safer word than students - whoever heard of "pupil power"?).

Since mine is not a calling conducive to long periods of tranquil reflection, let alone research, I thought I might dwell on the confrontations which are my preoccupation. They occur on many different planes - physical, political, intellectual. As is too often the case in the televised society, the superficial symptoms are those most easily dramatized. So a bloody head shocks the eye, while the challenge of the anti-intellectual brain passes without report.

HE 001 403

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

more

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

There is, obviously, a frontal challenge posed by resort to physical disruption and intimidation from the new left. It is more deeply rooted in personal experience but no more acceptable when it comes from militant blacks. It is most disgusting when it is the bully's backlash, whether in the form of police overkill, or the political overkill of recriminatory legistation or investigation which seeks to impose a pall of conformity on the campus.

The academy could not long survive if violence or counter violence, coercive disruption or coercive conformity were allowed to prevail. Fortunately no more than a tiny minority seek to tear down the university forcibly.

Thus far, anyway, it would not appear that there is a silent majority which would seek to suppressdissent or gain conformity by coercion. I confess I am more afraid of the latter than I am of the former. I know the Congress of the United States would disagree with me. Perhaps that itself proves my point. I would note that the President of the United States and his Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, and his Commissioner of Education deserve much of the credit for thus far stemming the tide of recriminatory legislation.

I would not belittle the dangers of forcible intrusion on the freedom of the academy, from without as well as from within. But I do not think it is our most fundamental or our most enduring challenge.

A second preoccupation of academic administrators and faculty leadership and trustees these days is suggested by the much mouthed and altogether stilted word "governance."

This is important even in its legal details. It does involve more than tidying up. There is a job of work to be done if the inherent conservatism of taxpayer and alumni support from outside, and the inherent faculty conservatism on academic matters on the inside, are not to harden the academic arteries just at a time when a capacity for change is most urgent. So the stakes in the reappraisal of our governing structures are not meagre.

But the important argument is not essentially about the legal superstructure of university government. The broader issue can be framed as "Anarchy or Hierarchy?"

The use of such terms may seem extreme as applied to academia, but I don't think so. Many, many well motivated students bitterly resent the fact that rewards and penalties, privileges and opportunities are parceled out at a university. In a true "community" they say there should be no distinction in rank, status, or authority among the various members. Students and faculty should have an undifferentiated initiative, voice, and power in the design of curricula and courses, in the hiring of teachers and the admission of students, and in the allocation of the university's resources.

With a beguiling confidence in our capacities, when they are asked how they would ever get any decisions made in such a "community", they reply, "Oh, you are hired to work that out."

more

But the problem is not one of political technique. It stems from the fact that the university is to some extent an inherently hierarchical, even aristocratic institution. Its existence presupposes that some people have something special to contribute to the thinking of others. That quality is usually related to superior experience, whether the direct experience of life or the vicarious experience of learning. The market would seem to confirm this, given the oversupply of talented students and the very scarce supply of talented faculty. (In between are the graduate students and post doctoral students, some competing for entry, some recruited.)

The university by its nature cannot avoid making judgments. It must decide, or someone must decide in its name, who shall be allowed to enter. It must decide who deserves the opportunity of initial junior appointment; who deserves the lifetime security of senior appointment.

It must decide who is most deserving of the honors, certification, the credentials of accomplishment. In largest part this is because society expects a warranty, not only of performance but also of intellectual responsibility. (It is interesting to note in passing that when the Harvard Law School offered the first year students the option of moving from a nine category grading system to a pass-fail scheme only about a third of them took up the option.)

Within all the controversy about grading lies a more significant clue to what the society expects of a university when it invests either the taxpayers' or the donors' capital in the work of the senior scholar or in the education of the young. These resources are made available not for therapy or self indulgence, but to develop the intellectual capacities of those who seem most promising. No pejorative catcalls of "elitism" can avoid the fact that the higher one goes on the educational ladder, the more expensive become the human and capital resources required. There is a demonstrable public interest in their wise rationing. Increasing selectivity is inherent in the highest levels of higher education.

Of course none of these judgments can be made with pristine objectivity. But history and ingenuity have evolved a structure, a procedure, and standards which do as best as may be to assure that the inevitable assessments and consequent rewards and burdens are handled with as little prejudice, as little cronyism as possible. "Academic due process" it might be called. Like due process of law it seems to reflect concern for the competence of the judge, for his independence, and most especially for his objectivity.

Even if few of the young seek to deny the inevitability of selectivity and hierarchy in university affairs and structure, many of them are wholly skeptical of pretensions to objectivity. In Professor Theodore Rozak's phrase they see Objective Consciousness as a Myth. Although their "Counter Culture" as he calls it reeks with romanticism, in their cynical skepticism of academic neutrality they are in the tradition of those legal "realists" of the thirties who pooh-poohed the objective compulsions of reason as a determinant of judicial decisions.

Obviously none of the judgments involved in academic selectivity and rewards and appointments can be made with total objectivity, but academic due process, like civil and criminal due process, is an ideal essential to university aspiration. At least it sets a standard for self consciousness and holds up a measure for the critic.

more

Cynical disparagement of objectivity as a "myth" seems to me both naive and irresponsible. Any claim of novelty to the observation that men are fallible at best, corruptible at worst, is naive. Its irresponsibility lies in the conclusion that since the ideal is unattainable it should not be held up as a standard to both practitioners and critics.

Precisely because the unknown truth defies conclusive verification; precisely because intellectual promise is not easily assayed; precisely because reasonable men will differ about the quality of another's work, it is all the more important that differences be articulated in terms of reason. The difficulty of judgment should not be used as an excuse for bias. Due process in academic affairs, as in legal affairs, is even more important for hard cases than for easy ones.

The apparatus and practices designed to assure as much objectivity as possible will vary from institution to institution. The common denominator which cannot vary, however, is a good faith attempt, at least, to assess the merits of the work or of the man - be he student or colleague - by a reasoned elaboration of a common understanding of these qualities related to the academic mission. Primary among these, surely, are the honesty and rigor of a man's thought and craftsmanship; and his ability to contribute to the understanding of those who listen to him, or argue with him, or read or view or listen to his works.

I say "reasoned elaboration" because there is no room for the notion that some unarticulated hunch, some subjective, unreasoned assertion should be allowed to substitute for evidence made pertinent by reasoned elaboration of the university's purpose. Abuse of academic power, like abuse of judicial power, can be held in check not so much by the independence of the judge as by the requirement that reasons must be given for the opinion. These reasons, in turn, must wash in terms of general principles and propositions embraced by the institution. The judge is disciplined by the realization that the reasons he gives in any one case would have to be applied to similar cases involving other people.

Universities would not survive any alteration in the name of governance which did not acknowledge that for the university to do its job, some people must sit in judgment on the work of others. Moreover no university could long maintain its quality, self respect, or the respect of others if it were to abandon a strenuous effort to make its judgments as objectively and as rationally as possible. A community of shamans and gurus would not be a university.

There is, however, an even more fundamental threat to the survival of the university than the political confrontations over issues of "governance."

Romantic shamanism may be a passing fad or fancy. Historical parallels with the early nineteenth century are drawn by both men of learning and by publicists. If journalistic, obituary salutes to the decade which ends day after tomorrow were to be believed, one might suppose that it would not be long before we could go back to our pursuit of truth in the light of reason, confident of the understanding and support of the young.

That is not the way I read the tea leaves.

more

While destructiveness is limited to a very small number; and while romantic visions of the university as a misty community without form or authority are confined to a limited minority; impatience is pervasive. Right, left, bright, dull, active, apathetic - the shadow of impatience touches them all. The confrontation which matters most in my view is the confrontation between impatience and the university.

Now in a sense this is nothing new. Most would-be Socrates are a crashing bore. Nothing is more tedious than to have to go around the block to get next door, just because some pedant wants to exhibit his erudition. Too often the prerequisite course is simply designed to flatter the ego of the person who wants to give only an "advanced" offering. The effort of the take-off is always a strain; it would be so much easier if we could only start at cruising altitude.

The challenge which disturbs me, however, is not the normal student bridling at grammatics and pedagogy. I am concerned, rather, with an impatience which, if it persists, is catered to, and comes to dominate university life might well be our undoing.

One target of impatience is inaction. Its stimulus is the daily intimacy with the horrors of war, poverty, violence, and oppression - all brought into the parlor on the television screen.

Another target of impatience is complexity. Hate and love seem so simple, so obvious and direct. Yet the structures of a technological society and its government seem hopelessly complicated, beyond the reach of most; seemingly unmanageable even to the few who do grasp the levers of power.

A third target of impatience is doubt. With a world to be saved, or simply a life to be lived, there is an overpowering urge to insulate yourself from the nagging, nibbling doubts which seem to spoil every confident hope and tarnish even the most ecstatic dream. Dogmatic assertion is a great relief. To some, blind fanaticism is "beautiful".

"Patience", we urge. But patience without purpose is boredom.

So "relevance" becomes the slogan of an impatient generation. Their plea is for release from the tedium of learning without purpose.

Better they should cry "significance", for the crisis of purpose transcends topical problems. Today's problems could be "solved", and still the vacuum of purpose would sap the patience which learning requires. Bright students would still perceive that their mastery even of "relevant" learning would often seem to be means without ends.

Once "success" has lost its meaning, then why not seek purpose in subjective expression? All life is a happening. All that is asked is that you "do your thing."

I do think we should be more forthcoming in our admission of the weaknesses and contradictions in our university inheritance.

more

We should recognize and admit that the university is not for all people, nor for most people at all times of their lives. It is not even the only or, for many, even the best circumstance for learning. Action, too, has its claim as a teacher of wisdom. Capacity can be extended and enlarged by doing as well as by thinking.

We should recognize also that as knowledge does become more relevant to operational decisions, universities do have an increasing professional and clinical function, for the potential operator as well as for the scholar. The applications of learning once associated primarily with law and medicine and engineering must spawn analogous applied sciences in social and environmental studies.

Most of all we should admit that not all scholarship and learning are equally significant. "Relevance" may not be the test, if that word is used only in connection with topical problems; but the quality of intellectual excitement does depend on whether the scholar is truly opening a new perspective or is simply accumulating data which does not itself contribute to understanding. Definitiveness does not excuse the want of significance.

We must even admit that reason is not the only clue to truth. Intuition and creative imagination have their role in perception as well as in expression; in learning as well as in life. Not all that is perceived can be analyzed, let alone weighed or measured. Not all that is worth expressing can be "programmed". Not all that is "true" can be proved by objective evidence.

We should admit all this.

We should leave room for, we should positively encourage, intuition, imagination, and the affirmation of revealed truth, even within the academy.

We can acknowledge all these things, but we must continue to assert that impetuous action, conscious oversimplification, refusal to doubt, and the rejection of reason are enemies of the university.

The teacher's and the scholar's purpose is no different, no less than the purpose of any man whose highest aspiration is to make a constructive impact on the lives of others. It is to enlarge the capacities and opportunities of his fellow men. The scholar, the critic no less than the scientist and the artist are driven by this hope. At best by genuine creation and discovery, at least by helping others to think or see or feel a little differently than they otherwise would have, this is the satisfaction which motivates the university membership. The university has no monopoly on this effort and its rewards. But the satisfaction is a moral satisfaction and we should not be sheepish in affirming it. Those who seek comparable and equally worthy satisfactions in the life of private and public action cannot expect to find that the life of the mind will sustain their ambition. But it must be defended fiercely by those to whom it is the essence of useful purpose.

A university must give its priority to the numerically small but historically significant band of men and women who believe that the worth and dignity of knowledge does not depend solely upon its current usefulness. They do not oppose

more

action, but they do not see action as the only purpose of learning. To a university man wisdom and ~~m~~understanding are ends in themselves.

A university must also nurture the aspiration to understand the universe in all its parts. At its highest level, learning hopes to discover and perfect explanations of man and the cosmos which are not contradicted by any other part of human experience. There are no short-cuts.

A university must glory in the privilege of doubt. Intellectual progress is made by finding fault with the last best thought you had. Argument is for the purpose of learning, not for the therapy of dogmatic assertion. Serenity is sought in the exhaustion of reason, rather than by turning off the hearing aid.

Neither table pounding nor dreamy euphoria can be permitted to substitute for plausible argument. If impatience is not to be allowed to short-circuit argument with unsupported assertions, reason must be honored above the clash of crude and noisy enthusiasms and antipathies.

There is much more at stake than the desirability of letting scholar-reachers indulge their private satisfaction. There is even more at stake than the widening of the horizons of students, apprentices, and the educated public.

I am struck by the learning and perception of a remarkable little book by E.R. Dodds: lectures he gave at Berkeley in 1949 and published a year later under the title The Greeks and the Irrational. He traces the gradual ascent of irrational elements in Hellenistic Greece and their eventual triumph over rationalism and all its potential glorious accomplishment. His concluding chapter is entitled the "Fear of Freedom." Rational choice, he notes, imposes a tremendous overload of moral responsibility. It is so much easier to abdicate choice to the world of irrational forces whatever their incarnation.

As he says toward the very end: "I have had our own situation constantly in mind. We, too, have witnessed the slow disintegration of an inherited conglomerate, starting among the educated class but now affecting the masses almost everywhere, yet still very far from complete. We too have experienced a great age of rationalism, marked by scientific advances beyond anything that earlier times had thought possible, and confronting mankind with the prospect of a society more open than any it has ever known. And in the last forty years we have also experienced something else - the unmistakable symptoms of a recoil from that prospect. It would appear that, in the words used recently by Andre Malraux, 'Western civilization has begun to doubt its own credentials.'

"What is the meaning of this recoil, this doubt? Is it the hesitation before the jump, or the beginning of a panic flight?"

The universities alone cannot assure the optimistic answer to Professor Dodds' question. There are forces of both passion and politics which may override them. But if we are not to slip into a dark age of irrationality the universities must defend the ideal of objectivity. They must insist on following the dictate of evidence and reasoned argument. They must not acquiesce in the desire of the impatient to escape the moral responsibility for rational choice.

If we should slip into a dark age of irrationality far better for the universities to live meagerly, while sticking to the integrity of reason, than to prosper elegantly in the corruption of a new orthodoxy.

//////